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LET'S TEACH COMPOSITION--IMPRACTICALLY.

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MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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AS ENGLISH EMERGED AS A RELATIVELY IMPORTANT SCHOOL SUBJECT IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR ERA, IT ALSO UNDERWENT A DEBILITATION IN CONTENT, PARTICULARLY AS IT BECAME MORE AND MORE IDENTIFIED WITH WRITTEN COMPOSITION. BEHIND THIS DECLINE WAS THE IMPOSITION OF PRACTICALITY AS THE RATIONALE FOR THE EMPHASIS GIVEN ENGLISH, THAT IS, THE UTILITARIAN NECESSITY TO SHOW IMMEDIATELY MEASURABLE IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS, PARTICULARLY IN TERMS OF A NARROWLY DEFINED FORMAL CORRECTNESS. A MORE EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE MIGHT BE TO TAKE THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE LINGUIST--THAT THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IS HUMANE AND MORE IMPORTANT THAN ITS IMMEDIATE UTILITY IN IMPROVING SKILL--AND INSIST ON THE HUMAN MEANINGS OF THE PROBLEMS OF CHOICE AND ADDRESS THAT WE FACE AS WRITERS AND SPEAKERS. THUS, COMPOSITION MIGHT BECOME AN IMPORTANT PART OF A GENERAL AND SEQUENTIAL STUDY OF LANGUAGE WITH A BROADER PERSPECTIVE THAN NARROWLY DEFINED "IMPROVEMENT." CONCEPTS WHICH MIGHT THEN BECOME THE CORE OF A SEQUENTIAL CURRICULUM WOULD INCLUDE (1) LANGUAGE ORIGIN AND ACQUISITION, (2) THE INTERRELATIONSHIP OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE, PARTICULARLY THE MANNER IN WHICH THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE INFLUENCES OUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD, (3) "COMMUNICATION" AS A PROCESS VIEWED FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE SEMANTICIST, PSYCHOLOGIST, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST, AND LITERARY CRITIC, AND LEADING TO THE STUDY OF (4) PROSE STYLE, WITH A SELF-AWARENESS, ON THE STUDENTS' PART, OF LANGUAGE AND THE RANGE OF BOTH CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE IN USING IT. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "MINNESOTA ENGLISH," VOL. 3, NO. 1, JANUARY 1967. (DL)

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS FOR THE SEVENTIES . . . 1
J. N. Hook

LET'S TEACH COMPOSITION--IMPRACTICALLY . . . . . 15
Gene L. Piché

LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHING OF READING. . . . . 26
Mildred A. Carlson

ENGLISH AND READING INSTITUTES FOR 1967. . . . . 31

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TE 000 118

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# LET'S TEACH COMPOSITION --IMPRACTICALLY

Gene L. Piche

(Can some other justification than practicality be found for the teaching of composition? Mr. Piche, a lecturer in secondary education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, explored this question at the MCTE Fall Regional Workshop at Detroit Lakes.)

Let me take as a theme for these remarks a quotation from Kenneth Burke's most provocative essay, "A Linguistic Approach to the Philosophy of Education."

> And there is always the aura of promise in education, a promise implied when it is not made explicit . . . . Courses in vocational training draw especially on such hopefulness, on the willingness of the student-customer to be assured that if he takes the course, he will somehow have a much better chance . . . to experience the deliciously immoral thrill that occurs when a slight gesture made accidentally at the right time, disproportionately calls forth an abrupt unloosening, an indecent downpour of revenue.[1]

Now it may be difficult to guess in just what terms I'm applying Mr. Burke's observation. Most of us don't find either the unloosening or the revenue achieved in teaching composition engagingly illicit. Nevertheless, his subtle cut at a preoccupation with the "practical" is, I think, relevant. But that's giving you the judgment before arguing the case.

To attempt the case I'd like to begin by pointing to certain developments in the history of teaching composition which emerged during the last quarter of the last century. A conspicuous feature of that teaching and the rhetorical theory on which it rested was its acceptance of a utilitarian objective consonant with larger social and economic factors contributing to the rise of English as a school subject. The theory, itself, represented a considerable narrowing of the traditional body of rhetorical information and precept. That restricted theory, along with

TE000 118

an avowedly practical objective, impelled us toward mechanical estimates of literacy and made it difficult to think of our subject as possessing any ordered, coherent structure. It has led, to paraphrase Mr. Burke, from our putting composition too exclusively under the "sign of the promissory."

* * * * *

I.

The teaching of reading, writing and speaking took place over long centuries of Western educational history within the boundaries of the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic. By the time of the Renaissance, the capstone of those studies was rhetoric. And rhetoric from antiquity had provided a body of theory and advice underlying the production and criticism of language invested with a social purpose. It included a theory of inquiry or invention, closely allied to logic, which helped the student to discover what to say and what best to say about it. It also included a theory of arrangement or organization of the whole composition, and a theory of style, which at the very least attempted to bring to a conscious level the resources of figure and trope, of diction and prose rhythm. The general theory of language provided by the trivium remained the core of traditional education. Rhetoric itself, as a theory of practical discourse, provided a rationale for the development of the student's own composition as well as a critical theory for attending to the writing and speaking of others. By and large, the general emphases of that theory persisted until well into the last century.

By the last half of the last century, for reasons that are extremely complex and fall within the uncertain boundaries of intellectual and social history as much as within the history of composition teaching in the schools, that general body of theory was breaking up. The traditional rhetorical canon of delivery was given over to the elocutionists, which meant that composition came to mean only written composition. The province of dialectic, and with it most of the traditional theory of invention, was carried away with courses in logic becoming less and less frequent in the high schools by 1900. Considerations of

the presumed attitudes, knowledge and values of audiences, implicit in traditional rhetorical theory, were dissipated and ultimtately distributed among the various social and behavioral sciences. What remained was a severely narrowed, if not trivialized theory of arrangement and style.

The extent of that process of reduction can be gauged by contrasting the kind of general theory of language which traditional rhetoric had represented with the principal doctrines which emerged at the same time that English teaching became a major responsibility of the secondary schools. Largely deprived of the functionalism that marked the best of the old, late 19th century theory can be summarized fairly quickly.[2] First there was the doctrine of the forms of discourse, which from about 1870 have come down to us as narration, description, exposition, and argument. The forms of discourse were augmented by a theory of arrangement largely restricted to the doctrine of the analytic paragraph and the topic sentence. It became what has been called a "geometric theory of the paragraph," and it included a great deal of sound advice about "unity, coherence, and emphasis." Most of the theory had been deduced and announced by a now little-remembered Scotch rhetorician, Alexander Bain, whose shadow is, unfortunately, very long. It falls on the latest edition of Warriner's handbook just as it has fallen on countless numbers of such books for roughly one hundred years.

I find it interesting to assume that what was happening to the theory of rhetoric and composition was in accord with larger social and educational developments which, in fact, probably hastened the process. American high school English was, of course, born in the post-Civil War period. It was a period of vast growth in American technology and American industry which created a need for a larger class of white collar workers to handle an increasing amount of paper work. The society had an expanding need for citizens armed with something beyond the primitive literacy of the common school. In the general contexts of industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of a middle class, the high school grew rapidly. And with the expansion of those schools, English grew. The subject--fighting for position against the opposition of the classicists--was given major support in the last decades of the century by a young Harvard president who led a movement in which the

importance of English, principally defined as written composition, was argued again and again. But the argument emphasized that it was to serve a utilitarian object--that it was to provide a "practical" rhetoric. Making good on that object, Harvard first, and then practically every other major college, instituted a series of entrance tests in English, emphasizing composition and stressing a practical doctrine of "correctness." A Harvard examiner, describing the tests in 1893, reaffirmed their object: "The composition must be correct in spelling; the candidate must know the rules of punctuation, and he must be able to apply them; he must write grammatically, in clear, simple, idiomatic English."[3]

Now, what I have described is a tyrannically compressed view with a great deal more assertion than proof. The point has been, simply, to emphasize the debilitation which was well under way as English as a school subject came to a position of relative importance. The theory of language which remained to inform the teaching of composition tended to be restricted to a prescriptive doctrine, a body of "advice" thought to be more practical in providing a growing number of high school students and college freshmen with minimal written skill. Professor Albert Kitzhaber reaches pretty much the same conclusion when he discusses the legacy of rhetorical theory informing our composition books:

> As for rhetoric, the majority of handbooks present a dessicated rhetorical doctrine that has probably done a good deal more over the years to hinder good writing than to foster it--the position of the topic sentence and mechanical rules for developing expository paragraphs, sets of critical abstractions which the student is urged to apply to his paragraphs and themes like a foot rule to a piece of lumber . . .[4]

That doctrine of formal correctness, emphasizing mechanical features of the composition process, came to be the principal set of standards by which our teaching and the evaluation of our teaching was informed. It isn't sim-

ply that it is a narrow, severely limited kind of theory (which on its face seems to have been largely unproductive). More importantly, it remains locked in by its initial assumption of a narrow utilitarian or practical purpose. Translated, that means to me that the content or the theory which we accept must always be brought to the bar of practicality and made to show proof of its effect in improving the student's immediately measurable skills. And, often enough, the canons of admissible evidence in answering the question are limited to considerations of a "practical" kind of formal correctness. Armed--or, rather, disarmed--with that kind of objective, restricting the scope of the theory we might admit, we simply don't have much of a show.

There is, of course, another kind of difficulty posed by our legacy of slim but practical theory. We're all familiar with the problem that develops when we raise questions of sequence and order in composition. I suspect we've long been uneasy about the perennial, episodic approach to the paragraph which neither goes nor grows. But at least since the appearance of Jerome Bruner's The Process of Education, that uneasiness has become a positive embarrassment. Bruner's argument, you will recall, was for our ordering of school studies by defining their intellectual substructures, by isolating major concepts which are points about which the theory of the subject accumulated. From these conceptual centers, he wrote, we might construct orderly, coherent curricula. Such concepts would identify the process or rhythm of the curriculum, organizing instruction in a sequence of spiraling additions of detail and maturity. But it has remained pretty difficult to imagine Bruner's good advice applied to teaching composition. What subject? What conceptual centers?

Finally, in spite of our practical objective, we face the embarrassing knowledge that we don't know much in any very precise sense about the actual behaviors involved in the act of composing, We do know from research--and even more poignantly, from our own experience--that whatever those behaviors are, they are not subject to very rapid change or development. That being the case, it becomes even more disconcerting to be in a position where all of what we teach is subject to a practieal accounting in

terms of a narrowly defined--and hardly to be found--kind of progress.

Well, then--what do we do? Throw out all standards? No more paragraph exercises? No more attention to correct spelling, punctuation, word choice? Is this still another attempt, another part of the conspiracy, to destroy the nation's moral fibre by pushing the doctrine of "anything goes"? Not at all. Certainly there are conventions of written and spoken form that are important, although in the case of much of our prescriptive advice, we may not be teaching the conventions that actually prevail. Instead, what I'm moving toward is a tentative admonition: not that we accept "anything goes" but that we look to see if we have anything going.

II.

The first step, it seems to me, might be to take a long hard look at our philosophy of composition teaching. We decided long ago that the teaching of literature should not be hemmed in by immediate bonds of practicality. The linguists among us have taken to justifying the study of scientifically accurate descriptions of English as liberal and humane and invested with an importance larger than its immediate utility in improving skill. They don't reject the objective of increasing skill. They transcend it in the name of the behavior most exclusively human--language. We might follow their lead, insisting on the human meanings of the problems of choice and address which each of us faces as he writes or speaks. In this view, composition might become an important part of a general study of language, at once incorporating a perspective broader than either phonemics or the paragraph. At the very least, it might provide a basis from which we could candidly, but with some logical consistency, defer questions of improvement too narrowly defined.

By deferring immediate questions of practicality we might free ourselves to more seriously entertain questions about the conceptual structure of the language-composition curriculum. If we were able to identify such a structure or sub-structure of knowledge about the process of communication--importantly related to acts of interpreting public discourse as well as composing it--we might be able to arrive at some sort of defensible sequence as well. But

the question of sequence must remain part of the prior question of whether we are willing to accept an intellectual frame larger than the paragraph. It implies the priority of our willingness to assert the importance of teaching knowledge *that*, whether or not it immediately results in our students' knowledge *how* to produce better paragraphs. Now, if we can make some kind of judgment like that about our purpose, what concepts or understandings might be--*just might be*--important?

First, we might begin at the level of concepts of language origin and acquisition. We might teach students something of what we know, or think we know, about the origins of language in the species. We might include some discussion of the principal psychological explanations of the process by which it is acquired. Introducing speculation about the origins of the remarkable system they've already mastered, we might impress them with the magnitude of the quantum leap taken in the dim history of the race when man discovered language so that he could develop culture. I suspect that such discussion, in addition to saying something of what it means to be human, might provide some attractive possibilities for student compositions as rich in fancy as some of those produced by more mature scholars and writers. And lest we assume that such speculation has little to do with composition or rhetoric, tradition, here at least, is on our side. Hugh Blair, whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* was the composition text committed to memory by American school boys for half a century, included a most fanciful lecture on "The Rise and Progress of Language."

A second concept or cluster of concepts that we might want to consider could be called the "culture concept." It has, I think, potential for combatting a pervasive kind of linguistic ethnocentrism that we sometimes inveigh against with our students. I don't think we need to peddle a crippling subjectivity, but we might be able to illustrate the close relationship between language and culture. We might, in the process, be able to suggest the way in which the structure of his language may predict certain features of the manner in which the writer or speaker selects a point of view, validates his assertions, or describes time and space.

The lesson to be learned is that typical ways of order-

ing our own observations of the "world out there" are influenced by the structure, the grammar of our language. We don't need to push the concept to the spongy ground of metaphysics, but we may at least generate discomfort for the 16-year-old naive realist who says "what he means and means what he sez--and you better believe it." To know, to be conscious before you compose, that you are both free and determined is a heady theme which we exploit richly elsewhere. From language and culture to sub-culture and dialect we might work our way, establishing a basis in theory for taking up questions of usage which are a traditional, if much abused, rhetorical problem.

A third group of concepts comes here under the term "communication." That term, like some others of our time, has become alloyed with a lot of base metal. The general demise of the more or less hopeful movement of the '40's that seemed to bring fresh air into freshman composition did not, apparently, live up to its promise. But viewed as a center, or focal point, the concept of communication as process might direct us to a body of principle and theory both very old and very new. Under a heading like communication, which I suspect would be more promising to a tenth grader than "rhetoric," we might begin by describing what he does when he writes or speaks in terms of "the communication model." And the model would, of course, include the interrelating elements of speaker (writer) addressing an audience on an occasion (that is, in a social, historical context) with a speech (a text i.e. with the agency of language) conditioned by a purpose. We might give him hypothetical and very real examples to demonstrate how each one of the elements in the model reciprocates with and shapes features of the other. We might even wish to tell him that the model was Aristotle's and ask him how he thought it compared with more recent ones developed by engineers or by literary critics like Kenneth Burke or I.A. Richards. We might also wish to compare the traditional types or functions of oratory--deliberative, forensic, ceremonial--with the standard doctrine of the forms of discourse--narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative--to see if these categories described any useful set of expectations about contemporary public discourse.

In addition to some such basic elements of classical

rhetorical theory, the communication concept ought to lead us to the development of materials and instruction informed by the more contemporary rhetorical perspectives of some social scientists. A unit on the process of persuasion could profitably include attention to what we know from research bearing on the differential effects of communication resulting from varying the order of presentation of arguments; effect studies based on comparison of media; results of manipulating assumptions about the expertness of credibility of the speaker or writer. We've known for a long time that we hear (even when we're reading) what we want to, but the social psychologist's description and ingenious experiments demonstrating the selectivity of our perceptions has a kind of scientific muscle that is too much lacking in what we tell students about writing and speaking. The semanticists, both General and generally, have encouraged us for some time to look at these problems--all of which emphasize the "limits of logic," and of language. I can't help believing that it is important for students to develop a sense of the <u>fragility</u> of all acts of human communication. Particularly in an age dominated by the hard sell, by arrogant assumptions made by "image-makers," it seems important that we develop with our students what has been called a "tragic" view of communication. It would be a view dominated by the clear admission that total understanding does not occur when two people communicate--and that the writer or speaker always plays for limited and marginal gains.

Something like this kind of study of the process of communication informed by the multiple perspectives of the semanticist, the psychologist and social psychologist, and the literary critic, might lead us to some broad considerations of modern prose style. In the upper years of the senior high school, having emphasized the limits imposed by his language, by his choice of role, and by the demands of his readers, he might be encouraged to see with better vision a contemporary prose style which tries to achieve directness, but which turns back on itself, modifying and circumscribing its breadth of assertion. He might better understand the implicit irony, so often signaling the writer's sense of his own limits. He might at least understand a prose whose rhetorical movement is less balanced--less symmetrical. And if the style is man--we might spec-

ulate with him that in some measure we write and speak like this because we no longer inhabit a universe perceived as ordered, balanced, symmetrical, continuous. That is to reemphasize that writing is a way of seeing.[5]

* * * * *

In what has been more exhortation than argument, I described the dissipation of traditional rhetorical theory as it tended in the last century to be replaced by the teaching of "composition." The older theory had in many respects been a philosophic theory which attempted to classify and describe the conceptual structure of acts of instrumental writing and speaking. The new term, "composition," was most often preceded by the adjective "practical" as if to emphasize that what it wanted was not theory but results. I'm not sure we got much of either in substituting a utilitarian object for one which had been at once practical and liberal.

Given that objective, we taught composition. Rather, we corrected compositions. Small wonder that the NCTE's recent national study of high school English programs, involving direct observation of classes in grades 7 through 12 in 168 presumably superior schools, reported few instances of composition teaching, but many instances of assigning and grading student writing.[6] Part of that problem, I think, rests on the extremely limited theory of "composition" which we inherited and our willingness to limit our function to a practical theory of correctness. Impressed by the arguments of corps of junior executives insisting on our guardianship of the semicolon, the teaching of composition became the dreariest of our enterprises.

In the name of a point of view both "new" and traditional, I've suggested that we consider an expanded conception of our subject. From concepts related to the broader study of language--its nature, origin and acquisition, its mediation of culture, its central position in the processes of human communication--we might develop a more genuinely liberal view of the teaching of practical discourse. But if we developed such a language-composition curriculum, would they write and speak better? I don't know. But I'd like to argue that we ask another question first. Would this kind of information, this kind

of knowledge, contribute to their understanding of a human dimension? Would it--could it create a self-awareness about language and the range of both choice and consequence in using it? If we can answer yes to either or both of those questions, then we may have enough to go on. We may have enough to make the language-composition component both important and liberal. We may be able to quiet our doubts until we can perfect better methods and better instruments for evaluating progress and purpose.

Footnotes

1. Modern Philosophies and Education, The Fifty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955).
2. Fortunately, more detailed interpretations are available. See, for instance: Donald K. Smith, "English, Speech, and the Language Arts: Disorder and Latter Day Sorrow," in The Changing Role of English Education, edited by Stanley B. Kegler (Champaign, Ill.; NCTE, 1965); John P. Hoshor, "American Contributions to Rhetorical Theory and Homiletics" and Marie Hochmuth and Richard Murphy, "Rhetorical and Elocutionary Training in Nineteenth Century Colleges," both of which appear in History of Speech Education in America, edited by Karl Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1954).
3. Byron S. Hurlbutt, "College Requirements in English," in Twenty Years of School and College English (Harvard University, 1896), p. 47.
4. Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1963), p. 16.
5. In the identification of conceptual clusters, I am indebted to discussions with Prof. Donald K. Smith regarding certain of the Minnesota Project English materials. Moreover, something like these emphases have shaped a course in "Rhetorical Studies" which we have taught for the past two summers to NDEA fellows.
6. James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, A Study of English Programs in Selected High Schools which Commonly Educate Outstanding Students in English, USOE Cooperative Research Project No. 1994 (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1966), pp. 192-194; 218.